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### On the Outside Reading In: An Analysis of “Non-sense” Feminist Poetry and Erin Mouré “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)”

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## On the Outside Reading In:

### An Analysis of “Non-sense” Feminist Poetry and Erin Mouré “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)”

The challenge of feminist literature is giving new meaning to familiar words and phrases that were born in a patriarchal society to describe patriarchal values. Giving new meaning to these words offers modern ways to inject women into different forms of literature. In her poetry, Erin Mouré attempts to reinvent language by exploring and challenging the purpose of words. In “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)”, Mouré takes a series of mundane words and stretches the boundaries of possible interpretations of these words to the extent of developing new meaning for the use of words. This new meaning for the use of words is defined by the lack of sense in the poem that distinguishes the text as feminist literature. Mouré describes this distinction as a “defiance of the real” (“8” 3); the “real” suggesting a space in which literature is controlled by the patriarchy. In this realm, the meaning of individual words exists on the outside of literature and language; however, the surface can be manipulated to reveal the inside of literature and the nonsense of language. In other words, all language has meaning but it is the presence of sense, or lack thereof, that determines the meaning. In Mouré’s “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)”, the meaning of nonsense is the excess of meaning.

To begin with the basics, the concept that all language has meaning is inevitable; language exists for the purpose of transmitting and exchanging meaning between people and things. The meaning of language exists on the outside of literature where the sense, described by Mouré as “the real”, is the surface level of understanding words. Sense requires an understanding of literature for what the language means which is identified by reading literature of the outside. For example, parts to Mouré’s “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)” can be understood on a surface level,

such as when she writes “that day I wanted to be two girls in a car” (2). The meanings of the individual words of the line are understood on a surface level because their definitions are recognized by the average English speaker and the sense of the words are clear in themselves and in context to one another. Additionally, readers can distinguish specific themes from these words, such as the concept of time, ideas about desire for companionship and privacy. The concept of time, the tense of the phrase, the subject/object relationship are all factors that contribute to the meaning of this line of the poem. However, the line itself truly has sense because the elements also work in conjunction with one another, in addition to functioning independently as parts of the English language. The sense of language is language as we know it, with the purpose to create meaning and to make sense in order to portray that meaning. However, as suggested in Nicole Brossard’s essay “From Radical to Integral”, language is “focused on the patriarchal systems and its tenacious will to endure in us, keeping us on the out/side of the magic of words” (2). Therefore, the meaning of literature is solely sourced from patriarchal messages and values. This meaning, however, can only exist on the outside of literature because sense exists on the surface level of language where the meaning of a collection of words (forming an idea) only has one meaning. In other words, if the meaning of a poem allows for the literature to have sense, it has only been read on the outside, on the surface level of language. The outside of literature is the vehicle for meaning which allows the reader to distinguish the literature to have sense, rather than “non-sense”, simply because the outside of the text delivers the meaning to the reader.

If sense is the principles of the patriarch, as Brossard suggests, and sense is determined by the presence of meaning, everything about language, including its purpose, exists to serve the transmission of male-dominated messaging of the patriarch. The existence of language is, in

itself, the exclusion of women in literature and self expression, demonstrating the need for poets like Mouré to refuse ““conventional word order and usage; [redeploy] grammar, punctuation, syntax and spelling; [juxtapose] as many as ten versions of a poem; and [ignore] the conventions of pronominal and prepositional reference”” (qtd. by Rudy 205). Mouré is able to achieve this defiance of patriarchal, dominant discourse in her poem “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)” through the use of “MacProse” which is a “freeware program” that randomly generates “syntactic combinations” (Rudy 211, 210). This rebellious technique of poetry forces the reader to read beyond the surface level of language. Instead, readers are challenged to go beyond the outside of literature to discover the nonsensical inside of literature. “MacProse” poetry expels the readers’ understanding of meaning because it removes words from their traditional context and patriarchal culture. As a result, the literature remains uninfluenced by the preceding knowledge of the meaning of certain words. Consider the phrase: “I admitted it; because we attended, to return was body” (Mouré, PILLAGE, 3). A surface level reading of the outside of the text would observe the past-tense; the subject, both singular and plural; and object, perhaps “body”. While the meaning of the words are known to an English reader, and independently, the meaning of the words give them sense. However, the words collectively, in context to one another do not have sense. The meaning of each word must now be reevaluated in the new context on the inside of language, a context that is specific to the existence of the word in relation to its neighbouring words, in the sentence and in the poem. The act of reevaluating the meaning of the words is, in fact, the act of reading inside the poem. By reading the inside of the poem, we recognize that the meaning of the literature does not make sense; that is to say, the literature is “non-sense”.

Not only does “nonsensical” literature require a feminist author, it asks that we read through a feminist lens of “reading in excess of signification” as “it often speaks directly – and

only – to women” (Rudy 205,206). The reader, specifically the woman reader, creates the context of nonsensical words, phrases and poetry out of her own personal female experience because the language has been freed from the framework of patriarchal discourse. The meaning of the literature falls into the hands of the readers of the text as they “become aware of the unexpected surplus of meaning *we* can attach to words by confronting them in their unusual and unexpected combinations and contexts” (Rudy 210). Now, as each reader attaches her own meaning to the language from her individual life experiences, a text develops an excess of meaning as no two feminist readers would interpret a “nonsensical” text the same. Let us revisit this line from Mouré’s poem “PILLAGE 1 (‘Oakland’)”: “I admitted it; because we attended, to return was body” (3). The meaning of these well-understood words, in the context of one another, raise a series of questions that each reader would answer differently: What has been admitted? Who is included in the pronoun “we”? And what is meant by the word “body”? The concept of nonsense poetry is that not only are such questions answered differently by each reader, but also that there is no meaning to certain words, like “body”, for example. The words have been randomly generated by an unbiased, nondiscriminatory program that is “incapable of generating a cliché because it has no culture and it has never met anyone” (qtd. by Rudy, 211). Each word was not selected based on its independent meaning inside or outside a particular context; rather, each word was selected as if it had no meaning at all until its meaning was reinvented in the context of the poem itself. Arguably, every word in the poem has no meaning because in the creation of the poem, meaning is irrelevant to the message of the text. The lack of meaning in this way is what classifies the poem to be nonsense. However, it is the lack of meaning, the “non-sense”, attached to the words in the poem that allows the text to also have an excess of meaning. The dichotomy of no meaning and too much meaning, whilst complex, is

what makes Mouré's work feminist literature. While "each woman takes patriarchal semantic substance as her own", Mouré was able to manipulate an existing, patriarchal language and use it to liberate women in literature by expelling the meaning of the words and leaving the message open for interpretation (Brossard 30). Mouré not only wrote her poetry with the intentions of allowing various interpretations, she develops poetry to be so open and unrestricted that it "can't be torn apart by anybody, anywhere, or in the university" ("8", 3). Arguably, Mouré has succeeded in her mission because while literary critics theorize and analyze her work to understand the meaning of literature, the fact of the matter is that the meaning of the text is that, from one perspective, there is no meaning at all. She has created a blank slate for women readers to decide what the work not only means, but more specifically, what it means to them.

In conclusion, in order to create feminist literature, meaning must be removed, leaving only nonsense or "non-sense". "Non-sense" is a lack of meaning that removes words from a patriarchal context and allows feminist readers to create the excess of meaning, a meaning that is only feminist. Mouré has created a literary space where the feminist reader's interpretation of literature is the meaning of language. As literary critics and literature students scratch their heads, confused by the challenge of Mouré's "too obscure, too difficult" poetry, women and feminist readers are finally liberated to understand and interpret literature in a way that speaks solely from the female experience (as qtd by Rudy, 2006).

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